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TAGS: [MOPS](#) [MARR](#) [PREL](#) [AF](#) [IT](#) [NATO](#)

SUBJECT: AFGHANISTAN: ITALY PLANS INCREASED ISAF ROLE

REF: KABUL 2624

Classified By: DCM ANNA BORG FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

1. (C) Summary. MFA Undersecretary Gianni Verneti and other officials told the Embassy that Italy intends to increase its military presence in Afghanistan with more special operations forces, more troops for the Herat Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) and Forward Support Base (FSB), a new Treasury Police contingent to assist and train Afghan border control, and new Carabinieri units to assist and train Afghans in environmental and cultural site protection. Total Italian military personnel in Afghanistan would go up from current 1370 to about 2000. Deployment of Italian AMX fighter-bombers is still in question. This military increase was planned under former PM Berlusconi's government. Embracing the plan, Prodi's center-left government will have to secure funding approval from parliament, which radical left coalition members will probably oppose. For the time being, the Italians are not discussing an increase in economic assistance. End Summary.

Italy wants to do more militarily in Afghanistan

2. (C) Verneti, Daisy (Margherita) Party's foreign affairs advisor and the new MFA Undersecretary covering central Asia (including North Korea), human rights, and democratization, told DCM Anna Borg on June 7 that Italy intends to undertake a "concrete increase" in its military role in Afghanistan. Verneti said that Italy would send special operations troops and AMX fighter-bombers for use in the west and south of Afghanistan, forces Verneti said would come ready to engage in combat operations when necessary. Italy would also increase troop levels at the Italian-led Herat PRT and the Spanish-led Herat FSB. Units from the Italian Treasury Police (Guardia di Finanza) would deploy to assist and train Afghan border police, while Carabinieri units would deploy to assist and train Afghans in environmental protection and protection of cultural sites. The Italian military also intends to intensify support for the anti-opium campaign, according to Verneti, who added that Italy was already discussing plans and options at NATO HQ.

3. (C) On June 8, RADM Luigi Binelli Mantelli, chief of staff for Chief of Defense ADM Giampaolo di Paola, confirmed Verneti's basic points to the DATT, adding that Italy has the military assets to support the increase. The AMX element is uncertain, however. It is possible, Binelli Mantelli said, that the Netherlands, rather than Italy, might step in to provide AMX.

4. (C) On June 9, MFA NATO Office Head Gianni Bardini confirmed to polmiloff most of Verneti's points and projected that Italian military personnel in Afghanistan would rise from the current 1370 to about 2000. Bardini said that no Italian troops would be stationed in the south of Afghanistan, though Italian troops participating in the NATO Quick Reaction Force (QRF) might well deploy in targeted operations there. He noted that the proposition for deploying 6 Italian AMX, with their explicit combat role, would be the most politically controversial element of the package for the Italian parliament.

Not a new initiative

5. (C) Bardini, whose last post was political counselor at the Italian NATO mission, stressed that this planned increase was not a new idea emanating from the Prodi government, but one that Berlusconi's center-right government had already decided on two to three months ago.

6. (C) Bardini said that MOD Arturo Parisi, in Brussels for the NATO Defense Ministerial, reassured Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer on June 8 that the Prodi government would sustain the plans already under discussion for increasing Italy's military presence in Afghanistan. Parisi told the press that Italy's presence in Afghanistan "will continue in accordance with previous commitments." On possibly sending more Italian troops, Parisi told the press, "It is a decision that Parliament will have to make."

Getting parliamentary approval could be tricky

7. (C) All interlocutors remark that it will not be an easy

task to get parliamentary approval for the increased military commitment in Afghanistan. At the end of June, parliament will vote to approve foreign military missions funding through December 31. Verneti hypothesized that the government would propose an omnibus foreign military spending decree that would include funding for the increased presence in Afghanistan. Bardini predicted that radical parties in Prodi's coalition would vote against any new military spending, forcing the center-left to seek cooperation from the center-right in approving the military spending decree.

Economic assistance still in question

18. (C) Verneti said that the new Italian government has not yet discussed increasing Italy's economic and civil sector assistance to Afghanistan. Backing up Verneti's point on June 9, MFA Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Anna della Croce, told polmiloff that the new government must soon come up with an Afghanistan assistance plan to begin in January 2007. In the meantime, della Croce said that Italy had exhausted the scarce assistance funds allocated. She hopes the government will match its new military commitment by also requesting from parliament an increased economic assistance package; but, for now, she said "confusion reigns" in this area.

Comment

19. (C) Embassy Rome agrees with Embassy Kabul (Reftel) that we should strongly support Italian plans in Afghanistan. We recommend that Secretary Rice stress the value of increased Italian military and economic assistance at her upcoming meeting with FM Massimo D'Alema.
SPOGLI